

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue “Re-Interpreting the Qur’an in the 21st Century”

Roberto Tottoli 

Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo, Università di Napoli L’Orientale, 80121 Napoli, Italy; rtottoli@unior.it

The number of books and articles on the Qur’an has become significant in recent decades. The revolution induced by the publication of *Qur’anic Studies* by John Wansbrough (d. 2002) in 1977 (Oxford, Oxford University Press) and the reactions that followed served the purpose of bringing the conversation on the origins of Islam and of the Qur’an back to the center of research, strongly (and sometimes polemically) determining contrasting lines of interpretation. These have stimulated research that has radically changed the field of Qur’anic studies in the West. Along with this, a growing interest in exegetical Islamic speculations has added new lines of research and contributed to a more comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of interpretation of the holy text in Islamic history.

The most recent Western production on the Qur’an that derives from these lines, in the wake of novelties of approach and vision, is a vivid field that includes a variety of interpretations. The emergence of a growing number of Muslim scholars in the area of Islamic studies in the West has brought about another novel element. Together with non-Muslim colleagues, these scholars have often tried to follow a different course in the study of the Qur’an. Consequentially, in the last fifty years, previous certainties have been swept away by new areas of Qur’anic studies or by the repositioning of old questions discussed with new methodologies.

On one hand, with Wansbrough, and claiming to take inspiration from investigative techniques honed in other disciplines (in the case of Wansbrough, the methods of the *Formgeschichte* and the demythologization of the Scripture carried out by Rudolf Bultmann), a fundamentally skeptical approach considers the Islamic tradition unusable, because of its late dating and because it has been invalidated by various contingencies that arose at the height of the Islamic era. In accordance with this interpretation, external coeval evidence and consonance with the surrounding religious environment of late antiquity is the preferred key for a correct interpretation of the origins of Islam and, therefore, of the Qur’an.

On the other hand, another, opposing attitude considers the Qur’an an exceptional theological and literary event, to a certain extent singular, and believes that many of its features can be explained by utilizing, albeit with discretion, what is recorded in the Islamic tradition. Sympathetic non-Muslim scholars do not fail to make themselves heard, and they aim for a relationship, or at least a dialogue, with Muslims. Muslim scholars who study or teach in Western universities and who generally focus on literary aspects of the Qur’anic text to defend its originality and, in a less direct manner, its unique, if not sacred, character, may have different goals but a similar attitude.

Between these two extremes, many other intermediate positions uphold less clear-cut and more articulated viewpoints, and they contend with the identification of specific problems or characteristics. They avoid a polarization that determines positions that do engage in dialogue with each other and that struggle to find common ground and, accordingly, fail in their attempt, in historical research, to move ahead progressively and to build, a little at a time, shared knowledge.

This collection of essays includes both visions, sometimes around the same Qur’anic passages, highlighting the different possibilities of reading and aiming to offer the reader



Citation: Tottoli, Roberto. 2022. Introduction to the Special Issue “Re-Interpreting the Qur’an in the 21st Century”. *Religions* 13: 134. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020134>

Received: 18 January 2022

Accepted: 20 January 2022

Published: 30 January 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

the variety of interpretation that, taken together, can contribute to re-interpreting the Qur'an in the coming years. In this case, re-interpreting refers to the contribution of scholars in evaluating the origin of the holy text and thus adding new evidence of the fascinating origin of a text still interrogating scholars and soliciting all the possible approaches.

However, interpreting and re-interpreting also refer to the Islamic exegetical tradition and the possible new paths of reading the Qur'anic word. The Qur'an has constituted a vast space of reading and interpretation, circumscribed in the concrete words of the canonized text, but enlarged out of all proportion by the continuous analysis of the meanings of the various chapters, verses and individual words. The pervasive character of the Qur'anic word in every order of religious and non-religious matters for the devout Muslim means that every literary and intellectual production can contain a Qur'anic reference implicitly or explicitly, according to the scholar's motivation or the explanation of the meaning given to the quotation. It is not reductive to consider all Islamic literature as a whole an articulate exegetical reflection on the Qur'anic word and at the same time a vehicle of religious knowledge that aspires to find support in the sacred text. In such a situation, the classical literary genre of *tafsīr* (exegesis) is the natural place for the interpretation of the holy text.

Re-interpreting the Qur'an also means the emergence of possible new dynamics of reading this literary genre, and the fostering of new paths of interpretation in the interaction with this literary tradition. Multiple possibilities also emerge in this field, within Islamic tradition and also in Western studies. Rather than the range between historical reconstruction and theological event, in this case the different approaches, following the developments in the genre in the last century at least, play on the connection to tradition and the significance accorded to it in relation to the need for a direct approach to the holy text, bearing on the contemporary visions and needs of an interpreter. Consequently, the question evoked in the title of an "interpretation" and the challenging definition of a "re-interpretation" is a concept that offers the potential for multiple readings.

The chapters collected in this Special Issue attest to this and, above all, to the multifaceted challenges that the reading of the Qur'an solicits in a field of studies, such as Qur'anic studies, growing in complexity, and secondly, the significant developments and proposals regarding the exegetical efforts around the holy text challenged by recent and contemporary history. These are indeed two different realms but deeply interconnected, both reflecting a variety of attitudes.

Following these lines, the scholars who have contributed to this Special Issue have been invited to answer to the main questions around a possible future of interpretation relating both to the Qur'an itself and to the history of interpretation. I personally thank those who responded to this proposal, who are amongst the major scholars in the field, thus permitting the display of a variety of answers and attitudes that effectively represent the current evolution of Qur'anic and exegetical studies.

As regards the Qur'anic text, the paper by Gabriel Said Reynolds highlights what can still be investigated in the analysis of single concepts as expressed by Qur'an verses. This is an exercise in interpretation by a scholar in dialogue with the combined contents of the holy text and the Islamic interpretative tradition. Reynolds argues that the Qur'an's doctrine of divine mercy is best understood in light of its pessimistic anthropology, an aspect of the text that is often underappreciated. The Qur'an refers frequently to humans as "ungrateful" and "hasty." It also makes divine punishments a regular element of human history, suggesting that rebellion is endemic to human nature. The essay maintains that it is precisely the rebelliousness of humans that makes God's initiative in sending merciful prophets, and the ministry of prophets in the Qur'an is an unmerited manifestation of divine compassion for a sinful humanity.

Devin Stewart offers another substantial chapter of his ongoing and innovative research on the Qur'an. In the paper, an overview of the investigation of genres in Qur'anic studies is given, discussing the utility of the theory of speech genres for the interpretation of the Qur'an generally. Through an inquiry into speech style and rhetoric, the author deepens this approach by addressing several Qur'anic passages whose interpretation has

been a matter of debate. Accordingly, a key to understand the Qur'an and its peculiarities better is given by the close attention paid to the generic conventions of the various types of speech that are contained in the Qur'an that may explain long-standing and current interpretive debates.

Todd Lawson adds further significance to the avenues of meaning offered by the Qur'an, trying to demonstrate how two distinct but deeply related literary genres, which had become especially prominent in the 7th-century Nile to Oxus region, have left an enduring impression on the form and contents of the Qur'an. This is not intended to suggest that the Qur'an was "influenced" by this or that extraneous or extra-textual phenomena. Rather, it is suggested that, along the lines of the Qur'an's own theory of revelation, it speaks, through Muhammad's human community "in the language of his people" (Q 14:4). Put another way, the Qur'an employs themes and structures from both epic and apocalypse that would have been familiar to its audience in order to reveal and make clear its most cherished sacred truths, among which are: the Oneness of God; the Oneness of Religion; and the Oneness of Humanity. Epic and apocalypse, then, emerge as features of the cultural and imaginative language of the intended audience of the Quran, just as Arabic is its "linguistic" language.

Different attitudes and the contrasting results that originate from them are evidenced by two chapters discussing similar themes, i.e., more or less the same topic as displayed in various passages demonstrating differences. This is the core of the varying attitudes of those who see in these differences the composite nature of the text and those who perceive in them the signs of an inner evolution created by the contingency of the message.

Angelika Neuwirth and Dirk Hartwig advocate a new approach to the Qur'an: to look at the text as a transcript of the earliest community's intervention in major debates of its time. Not earlier textual traditions, however ("reception history"), but particular burning theological questions that in the epistemic space of Late Antiquity were identified as the essential trigger of particular Qur'anic proclamations. Thus, the new—Late Antiquity—perception of evil: epistemic troubles experienced in the innermost selves of individuals—which cropped up during the sectarian strife in Middle Mecca—is explained through the primordial rebellion of Diabolos/Iblīs. This figure is portrayed in the Qur'an as a daring "dissenter in heaven" such as, before the Qur'an, in various Biblical contexts (Job, Gospels, etc.). His main characteristic is his eloquence and logical reasoning, which has earned him the epithet of the "inventor of *qiyās*/syllogism" in later Islamic tradition. His Qur'anic development is projected against the backdrop of rabbinic, patristic and poetic exegeses.

Guillaume Dye also deals with Iblīs and the related Qur'anic narratives. He starts, as is most typical in his approach, from a review of methods that have proved fruitful in Biblical and New Testament studies, such as form criticism and redaction criticism and their application to the Qur'anic corpus. In relation to specific Qur'anic passages, he tries to exemplify the relevance of redaction criticism through two examples with the aim of accounting for the "synoptic problem" (the presence, in the Qur'an, of variant parallel narratives), through an examination of some aspects of the Adam–Iblīs narratives (more precisely the composition of Q 2:30–38 and the nature of the relations between Q 38:71–85 and Q 15:26–43); and the beginning of Q 55. According to Dye, the later versions of a parallel story are, in the examples discussed here, rewritings of earlier stories, and sura 55 would display the intervention of different authors, with two different profiles.

The paper by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi is somehow at the middle of the Qur'an-based analysis and those dealing with later interpretative tradition and *tafsīr* literature. It moves from the Shi'i vision of the origins and the question of the integrity of the Qur'an connected to their alternative (in respect to Sunnis) vision of what happened and how the text should consequently be approached. Notwithstanding the divine origin and character such a condition impacts on the theological meaning accorded to the 'Uthmānic vulgate and further pushed interpretative approaches in the realm of symbolic and counteracting attitudes, where the literal meanings taken at face value are secondary.

When examining the exegetical realm, the papers collected include a variety of possible approaches and lines. Tarif Khalidi, for instance, has produced a kind of personal testimony, derived from his unique experience as translator of the Qur'an, supporting the need for a new commentary. This new commentary should face current questions and sensibilities and convey a vision of Islam more in tune with Islamic history. The substantial Muslim communities living outside the Muslim world are a reason to prompt a new approach and to imagine a new exegesis that can ideally recall the so-called literary approaches of the 20th-century-Qur'an commentary tradition. The chosen topics should also reflect contemporary sensitivities in a way that recalls modernist visions and an urgent need to update a religious agenda in the global confrontation with other religions.

A leading figure and a major protagonist in the search for new paths in interpretation, amina wadud, also offers a unique example of the need for and possibility of new readings of the Qur'anic text in what she introduces as a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an. Highlighting the importance of lived realities to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an and constantly referring to her own pioneering approach and experience, wadud offers an invaluable testimony of how the dominant and prolific model of centering analysis of sacred text and religious practice around men and men's experience is problematic today. She discusses specific Qur'an passages in relation to creation and cosmology, the story of Lot/Lut and themes such as the question of *sharī'a* and how she came to a theological perspective on gender equality over the last two decades. This is a clear, and affirmed with a loud voice, indication of one strong and fundamental line of interpretation for this and the next generations, based on personal experience and unique Qur'anic analysis, as given here by wadud.

Abdullah Saeed and Ali Akbar propose a step further, pointing to the contextual nature of interpretation and how the contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur'an can enable Muslims to follow its ethical teachings in accordance with contemporary needs and circumstances without sacrificing fundamental Qur'anic values. In order to do so, the article refers to Qur'anic passages related to freedom of religion and the laws of punishment, and explores how a contextualist approach to interpreting such passages may yield different results to a textualist or literalist approach.

The Shi'i/Sunni divide in interpretation is at the core of the chapter by Mun'im Sirry, who discusses the Qur'anic term *ulū 'l-amr* (those in authority, Qur. 4:59, 83), which is central to the Muslim understanding of leadership. Early Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an is reviewed, tracing the early development of the meaning of *ulū 'l-amr* in the works (*tafsīr*) of both Sunni and Shi'i Qur'an commentators during the first six hundred years of Islamic history. The diversity of Muslim interpretations and the different trajectories of Sunni and Shi'i exegesis, as well as the process of exegetical systematization, offer evidence of the fact that Sunni exegetes seem to engage with one another internally, while Shi'i commentators tend to polemicize Sunni exegesis to uphold their vision. Mustansir Mir also reviews exegetical discussions of the Qur'an from Sunni and Shi'i literature in relation to passage from the sura of Joseph. His aim is somewhat different and underlines the originality of the interpretations given by Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1418/1997). Mir has dedicated much effort and many publications to discussing and presenting Iṣlāḥī's commentary of the Qur'an to a Western audience, and this contribution is a further example of his original approach, suggesting that Iṣlāḥī's can be a way to offer a new Qur'anic (re-)interpretation.

The origin of this Special Issue was due to an approach from the journal *Religions*, which contacted me some time ago while I was working on my essay *Leggere e studiare il Corano: una guida* (Roma, Istituto per l'Oriente), whose translation into English is going to appear in 2022 (*Reading and Translating the Qur'an: A Guide*, Berlin—Boston, De Gruyter) in the series "The European Qur'an". This series includes and will include research and works originating in the ERC Synergy Project "The European Qur'an. Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion (1150–1850) /EuQu" funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement no. 810141 and

directed by Mercedes García-Arenal (CSIC Madrid), with John Tolan (Nantes), Jan Loop (Copenhagen) and me (Naples).

Though the interpretation and re-interpretation of the Qur'an in the 21st century extend beyond the historical extent of the research project and even the scope of my essay mentioned above, they represent a significant continuation of them and imply a dialogue with contemporary scholars working on the Qur'an and Qur'anic interpretation. For this reason, I accepted the invitation by *Religions* to edit such an issue and it was a pleasure to hear from some of the most significant researchers in these fields and I thank all of them for their contributions to the collection as a whole. Last but not least, I would also like to thank Gloria Qi, who followed the long editorial process and contributed to the final product, which is, in my opinion, a coherent and substantial contribution to the contemporary study of the Qur'an.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.